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INTERSTATE COMMERCE COMMISSION

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REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF THE BUREAU OF SAFETY IN RE
INVESTIGATION OF AN ACCIDENT WHICH OCCURRED ON THE
NORTHWESTERN PACIFIC RAILROAD NEAR LARGO, CALIF.,
ON FEBRUARY 28, 1929.

June 11, 1929

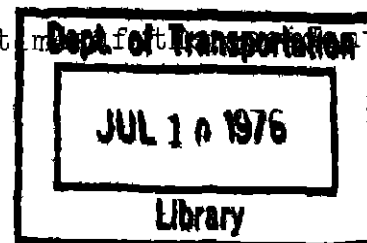
To the Commission:

On February 28, 1929, there was a head-end collision between a passenger train and a freight train on the Northwestern Pacific Railroad near Largo, Calif., which resulted in the death of 3 employees and the injury of 32 passengers, 2 persons carried under contract, 3 employees on duty and 1 employee off duty.

Location and method of operation

This accident occurred on that part of the Southern Division extending between Fulton and Willits, Calif., a distance of 81 miles, this is a single-track line over which trains are operated by time-table and train orders, no block-signal system being in use. The accident occurred at a point 1,801 feet north of the north passing-track switch at Largo, this passing track being located on the west side of the main track. Approaching the point of accident from the south there is a 6° curve to the right 439.6 feet in length and then tangent track for a distance of 192.7 feet, followed by a 3° curve to the left 501.7 feet in length, the accident occurring on the last-mentioned curve at a point 260.4 feet from its southern end. Approaching from the north there is an 8° curve to the right 544.3 feet in length, from which point the track is tangent for a distance of 139.1 feet, followed by the curve on which the accident occurred. The grade is 0.28 per cent ascending for northbound trains at the point of accident. There is a 100-foot embankment on the inside of the curve on which the accident occurred and a small tree on the side of this embankment close to the track restricted the view of the approaching trains to about 200 feet.

The weather was clear at the time of the accident, which occurred at about 11.48 a.m.



Description

Northbound passenger train No. 2 consisted of one mail and express car, one baggage car, one smoking car and one coach, all of steel construction, hauled by engine 141, and was in charge of Conductor Donohue and Engineman Bradley. Upon arrival at Hopland, 3.8 miles south of Largo, the crew received a copy of train order No. 32, Form 31, fixing a meet with extra 184 at Largo. Train No. 2 left Hopland at 11.40 a.m., on time, passed Largo without stopping, and collided with extra 184 while traveling at a speed estimated to have been between 25 and 30 miles per hour.

Southbound freight train extra 184 consisted of 31 cars and a caboose, hauled by engine 184, and was in charge of Conductor Bradley and Engineman Cunard. This train left Ukiah, 10.1 miles north of Largo, at 11.27 a.m., the crew having received at that point a copy of train order No. 32, Form 19, previously mentioned, and was approaching Largo at a speed of from 10 to 15 miles per hour when it collided with train No. 2.

Both engines were derailed and came to rest leaning toward the west with their front ends against the embankment. The tender of engine 184 came to rest down the embankment on the east side of the track with its forward end about 15 feet from the track, both engines and their tenders were badly damaged. The first three cars in extra 184 were derailed and demolished while the fourth car was considerably damaged and the fifth car was slightly damaged. All of the cars in train No. 2 remained on the track except the rear truck of the last car, but they all sustained more or less damage. The employees killed were the engineman and fireman of extra 184 and the engineman of train No. 2.

Summary of evidence

Fireman Mohn, of train No. 2, stated that while his train was leaving Hopland he read the train order and then returned it to the engineman, at the same time calling the engineman's attention to the meet. He said no mention was made of it again and that he forgot it and evidently the engineman also failed to remember it as he did not reduce speed approaching Largo while there was no communicating signal received from the conductor as required by the rules calling attention to the requirements of the order, although upon reaching a point just north of the south passing-track switch the engineman sounded a station

whistle signal which was followed by a road-crossing signal. Fireman Mohn said he was riding on his seatbox looking ahead as his train approached the point of accident and he observed the pilot of the engine of extra 184 as soon as it came into view, at a distance he estimated to have been about two or two and one-half car-lengths distant. He immediately warned the engineman and then jumped out the window, and was not certain whether the engineman applied the brakes although he thought he heard the air go on. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the accident at about 30 miles per hour. Fireman Mohn also said that the brakes were in good operating condition, and that the engineman was in good physical condition and on the alert.

Conductor Donohue, of train No. 2, stated that train orders were received at various points, including order No. 32 at Hopland, copies of which were delivered to the engineman. Several trains had been met before arriving at Largo, and as his train was approaching all of these previous meeting points a communicating signal was sounded which was acknowledged by the engineman. When order No. 32 was delivered to him at Hopland he read it to the operator and signed it, after which he delivered a copy of the order together with a clearance card to the engineman, who at that time was standing near the combination car. The engineman in turn signed the conductor's copy and then read the order back to him, remarking at the time that he thought it strange the order did not require their train to take siding at Largo. Conductor Donohue then boarded the train and handed the order to the head brakeman and after an opposing train had passed his own train proceeded. While en route toward Largo the head brakeman called his attention to the meet with extra 184 but did not return the order, which he presumed the head brakeman had delivered to the flagman. He heard no whistle signals sounded and when his train was approaching Largo he did not sound a communicating signal, as required, and he said he was not aware his train had passed that point until after the accident occurred, although he was thoroughly familiar with the locality and was sitting in the smoking car, on the side opposite the passing track, not engaged in any work to distract his attention. His first knowledge of anything unusual was when he felt an emergency application of the brakes which was followed almost simultaneously by the collision. He could not account for every member of the crew overlooking the meet. Conductor Donohue further stated that he had talked with the engineman on several occasions during the trip and that the engineman appeared to be normal in

every respect, and that the train had been handled properly prior to the accident.

Head Brakeman Joslin, of train No. 2, stated that his conductor gave him all of the train orders to read and that he would repeat them and then return them to the conductor, this procedure being followed except in the case of train order No. 32. He did not return this order but placed it in his pocket, for the reason that the conductor left while he was reading it, he reminded the conductor of the meet a few minutes later, or just after passing the north switch at Hopland, but failed to return the order at this time as he did not think to do so. He did not know that it was customary with this crew for the head brakeman to show the order to the flagman. Head Brakeman Joslin then sat down in the front seat of the smoking car on the right side with the idea of being in a position to open the passing track switch at Largo for the freight train providing it had not arrived when his train reached that point. When he thought his train was nearing Largo he left his seat intending to open the left vestibule door but had just gotten to his feet when he felt an application of the brakes followed immediately by the accident. He said he did not know when the train passed over the passing track switches at Largo and had not the slightest idea that it had passed that point, even after he got off the train after the accident, not learning until later that his train collided with extra 184. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the accident at 25 or 30 miles per hour. He did not hear the engine whistle sounded nor a communicating signal given approaching Largo, although such signals had been sounded approaching all other meeting points. Head Brakeman Joslin, who was an experienced man although a new man with this crew, further stated that his last trip over the territory in which the accident occurred was on January 5, but during the month of December, 1928, he had made 20 or 21 trips in passenger service.

Flagman Allen, of train No. 2, stated that when his train arrived at Hopland he observed that the train-order board was in stop position but did not know whether a train order was to be delivered or just a clearance card; he saw no one handling orders before departing from that point and was not shown any orders afterwards. Between Hopland and the point of accident he rode on the left side of the last car and did not hear any signals sounded

approaching Largo. From his position on the train he observed the passing track at Largo but as he had no information that a meet had been fixed at that point he made no effort to stop the train. He said that on previous trips it was the practice of the regular head brakeman to bring the train orders to him but on the trip on which the accident occurred he had seen the orders received at only one station and that was when the conductor and brakeman boarded the rear end of the train and the brakeman handed them to him, although he was aware that orders had been received at other points. He understood that the rules required that conductors have their brakeman read train orders, but gave as his reason for not attempting to ascertain the contents of these orders the fact that he had been instructed by an official of the company that a flagman must remain at the rear end of the train at all times. Prior to arriving at Largo he had had an opportunity to call the conductor's and brakeman's attention to the fact that he was not being shown the train orders but had failed to take such action, nor did he inquire of the conductor as to what orders had been received at Hopland when the conductor came into the rear car after leaving that station. Flagman Allen further stated that the rules did not require him to request that the conductor allow him to read train orders but that had he done so in this particular case the accident probably would have been prevented.

The surviving members of the crew of extra 184 were familiar with the requirements of train order No. 32 and none of them was aware of anything unusual until just before the accident occurred. Head Brakeman Perry stated that he was riding in the gangway of the engine when the fireman shouted a warning, and upon looking ahead he observed the engine of train No. 2 not more than 100 feet distant; he immediately jumped off. He said the train was drifting at the time and that the engineman applied the brakes in emergency as soon as the warning of the fireman was given. He estimated the speed of his train at the time of the accident at 10 or 15 miles per hour. Both Conductor Bradley and Brakeman Staples felt the emergency application of the brakes just prior to the accident and estimated the speed at the time of its occurrence to have been about 15 miles per hour.

Conclusions

This accident was caused by the failure to obey a meet order, for which the entire crew of train No. 2 was responsible.

The evidence indicates that all of the members of the crew of train No. 2, except Flagman Allen, had a clear understanding of train order No. 32 and knew that their train was required to meet extra 184 at Largo. Fireman Mohn said that he forgot it before arrival at the meeting point and consequently did not call the engineman's attention to the fact that he was overrunning the meeting point. Conductor Donohue and brakeman Joslin maintained that while they had the order in mind neither of them realized their train had passed Largo until after the accident, although they were not engaged in anything that would distract their attention. Flagman Allen did not see the order, although he had seen the train-order board displayed at Hopland, and he made no effort after leaving that point to ascertain what orders had been received even though he had an opportunity to do so when the conductor came into the car in which he was riding. He claimed the rules did not require him to ask the conductor for the orders, and this is perfectly true, but his own judgment should have prompted him to show some interest in the matter.

The employees involved were experienced men and at the time of the accident none of them had been on duty in violation of any of the provisions of the hours of service law.

Respectfully submitted,

W. P. BORLAND,

Director.